REMEMBER

February 5, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
1 Corinthians 11:23-26

"Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."
-1 Corinthians 22:25b (RSV)

For just a moment or two this morning please engage in an exercise of intentional remembering. If you wish please feel free to close your eyes, although I have found that to be a rather precarious thing to do when, on rare occasion, I sit where you are sitting. In any event, eyes open or closed, reach back through your memory, over the years and decades, and recall the first house in which you lived and which you can remember. Reconstruct it in your mind: its shape, its color, what it looked like from the outside. Now enter the house and look at the rooms, breath in its odor, walk into the kitchen and look at the sink and stove and cabinets.

I don't know about you, but at this point I'm ready to put some people in the picture; and there's something on the stove cooking and it smells great. And I'd like to go over to the corner of the living room, turn on the big Philco, sit in the old soft chair and listen to the Lone Ranger or Sergeant Preston of the Yukon, until dinnertime, and we can eat whatever is producing that wonderful aroma in the kitchen.

This is dangerous. You may be gone for the duration, wandering around that house. But that's all right because the ability to do it, to remember with almost aesthetic precision, to enter into those memories and actually to experience again the remembered places and people and events is what, in no small measure, makes us human and gives us our particular identity. The whole dynamic is related to our capacity for faith.

Oliver Sacks wrote a book two years ago about patients suffering Korsakov's Syndrome, a "neurological disorder marked by profound and permanent amnesia." The author tells about two patients who "have no way of knowing from moment to moment where they are, whom they are with, what they were doing just a moment ago, or, most poignantly, who they are." [Craig Dykstra, Memory & Truth, Theology Today, July 1987, p. 159-163] Sacks comments, "to be ourselves we must have ourselves - possess, if need be re-possess, our life stories. We must 're-collect' ourselves, recollect the inner drama, the narrative of ourselves."

When we talk about personal religious faith - how we got it, why we don't have more, personal faith formation, individual faith journeys - we begin with who we are. By acknowledging, perhaps for the first time, that we are all those people we were - the wide-eyed child, the rebellious adolescent, the intense young adult, we begin... In order to be a whole person you and I need to claim who we used to be, as embarrassing as that might be. In order to understand our faith we need to reclaim, and perhaps in remembering to relive, those times and places and relationships when God touched us.

There is a concern that our culture suffers from a sense of drifting, rootlessness and absence of purpose because of memory loss. One study "laments the fact that even the basic cultural information needed to read a popular news magazine intelligently is simply not known by a high percentage of our population." The book includes the distressing fact that of a thousand 16-18 year olds, "half could not identify Joseph Stalin or Winston Churchill, ten percent thought Peter Ustinov was a leader of the Russian Revolution and 75 percent had no idea what Reconstruction was." [Ibid, Dykstra]

One of the clearest and most consistent imperatives in the Bible is "Remember." In the Old Testament stories of slavery and exodus and wandering through the wilderness, a nameless, faceless tribe of Semites become the people of God. And what they tell one another, over and over and over, around their campfires, in their tents and houses, when they are free and when they are in captivity, when they are being persecuted, chased, killed, and when they are singing their songs at their sacred altars is - "Remember."

"I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord;
Yea I will remember thy works of old,"
the Psalmist wrote.

A fundamental, basic religious activity in the Bible is remembering. And so when St. Paul wrote a letter to a particularly difficult and obstreperous community of Christians in the Greek city of Corinth, his prescription for them was not a stern lecture, but the admonition to remember. Their problem was that they had forgotten who they were. Their little church was in trouble. There were factions arguing with one another about the fine points of the faith and about who was right. There were arguments about how to run the church and who was in charge. People were upset with each other, and as Christians have always seemed to do, were saving their best barbs and worst meanness for each other - in the church. Worst of all, their internal division was polluting the atmosphere of worship. When they celebrated the Holy Supper of the Lord, it was an actual meal. And, of all things, some of them came early to get the best and the most of the food, so that others got none: and while they were at it, the early arrivers started in on the wine, so that by the time they got to the ritual act of communion, at the end of the supper, they had had too much to drink. It was a sorry situation.

When Paul heard about it, he wrote the letter and when he got down to particulars he didn't scold particularly, and he didn't launch into a complicated tirade about the nature of sacramental communion. What he told

them was - "Remember - Remember the Lord, who on the night he was betrayed took bread and when he had given thanks he broke it and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'" "Remember," said Paul. "Remember Jesus Christ... Remember who you are."

Churches have memories. The older they are, the longer the memories. Churches have memories and those memories are the repository of the church's identity. This is a good year for church remembering around here. 1989 is the 200th anniversary of the National Presbyterian Church. It is also the 75th anniversary of the dedication of this building, on this site. Furthermore next Sunday, February 12, is the 118th anniversary of the origination of Fourth Presbyterian Church.

Every church has a memory which is the repository of its identity and every congregation needs to enter its memory, reclaim and retell its story. Ours is a good one...

On February 12, 1871, when Ullysses S. Grant was the President of the United States, and R. B. Mason was the Mayor of Chicago, when the population of the city was 334,000 and the north city limit was Fullerton Avenue, this congregation was born. We are a merger actually of two churches representing two angry factions of Presbyterians who finally got around to burying the hatchet and forgiving one another. So the people of old Westminster Church and North Church got together and called themselves the new Fourth Presbyterian Church and moved into old North Church's building on the southeast corner of Grand and Wabash and started immediately to remodel and freshen it a bit. A very distinguished clergyman, David Swing, was pastor.

When the remodeling was completed the new congregation moved out of the theater where they had been worshipping for six months and held their first worship service on October 8, 1871. That night Chicago burned down - including the north side and the newly remodeled Fourth Presbyterian Church. It was either a looter or a very astute church member, but in the middle of the night someone took the communion chalice and hid it by the lake shore for safekeeping. It was later returned to the church and it is the chalice on our communion table when we celebrate the Sacrament.

The congregation, our fathers and mothers in the faith, built again with help from Presbyterians in the East, this time at the corner of Rush and Superior and dedicated a new building on February 1, 1884. The church prospered and grew and in 1909 called John Timothy Stone from Baltimore to be its pastor. What an act of courage and faith it was, just three years later, to purchase a lot, hire one of the best architects in the country and break ground for a wonderful new building - when Michigan Avenue was called Pine Street and the lake shore was where the Hancock Building stands and there was no Michigan Avenue bridge.

The memories of this congregation include that and much more; they include the strong and progressive leadership of Harrison Ray Anderson and the sheltering of a congregation of Japanese Christians during the Second World War; and an eloquent Welshman, Elam Davies, who spoke to and for the congregation through the turbulent 60s and 70s and 80s, and led us to this

hour. And it includes hundreds and hundreds of men and women who have come here with great faith and hope and devotion.

Remember - but - remember that the content of our best memories always includes the compelling power of the future. No church can survive on its memories alone. Any church which remembers the Lord Jesus Christ will find itself called by him to look forward as well.

The truth is that the past is worth remembering because the important people back there were looking forward. The temptation is always to forget that; to enjoy the safe, comfortability of the tradition and forget that the tradition itself is one of always moving ahead with hope and vision and change.

The danger culturally is that we will romanticize the past and try to move into the future only looking backward. One of my favorite whimsical books is The Good Old Days - They Were Terrible (Otto L. Bettmann) - a grim and graphic account of what it was like to live in an American city between 1870 and 1900.

In an essay in a theological journal recently, the author noted that churches that only look back - "who stress memory exclusively... risk becoming 'fossil' churches. A fossil is an extraordinarily faithful witness to the past, but it is incapable of responding to the present or to the future."

Churches that have no memory - churches that look only ahead, churches which "stress vision and mission without rootedness... risk becoming 'chameleon churches.' Having no identity of its own, it is likely to take on the coloration of whatever ideology, cultural context, or fad happens to surround it."

A faithful church will stand with "one foot rooted in tradition from which it derives identity... and the other foot in the future, God's future, toward which it lives in hope." [See Bruce C. Birch, "Memory & Congregational Life," Weavings, Jan./Feb. 89, p. 9]

So, members of Fourth Presbyterian Church, remember who you are. Remember your past. Enter into the memories. Reclaim them and remember that we are who we are today - we are where we are -- because the people before us were looking forward.

Members of other churches, enter into the equally rich memories of your congregation. A faithful church will stand with one foot in the past and the other in the future to which God calls with hope. It is true about us as well: Faithfulness involves remembering who we were and recovering the past. But it also means living into the future with trust and hope and confidence.

I invite you to enter your personal memories and to reclaim your story and your identity. You were formed by the events and people you remember. Thank God for them. Remember.

Remember and know that you have not been alone on your journey. Remember that there has been one with you, following, accompanying, leading, inviting your faith and trust and that the one whose presence in your life is part of your tradition promises to be in the future toward which you are living.

Remember the Lord Jesus Christ... and as you do this morning, eating bread and drinking the cup in remembrance of him - enter into the depths of it. Enter into that exquisite and beautiful mystery - that what we remember is the one who is God's word to us, one who has loved us and lived for us and died for us... one who has never forgotten us and will remember us in the future - always - forever... world without end. Amen.

2/5/89